The ‘Cruelty’ of God.

Taken from a discussion at:

<http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?t=661459>

**Question:**

Having a discussion with a bible study about Exodus 32. We frequently discuss the method with which scripture is interpreted. This verse causes a huge problem, especially the section in bold:  
  
25 Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. 26 So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him. 27 Then he said to them, "**This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says:** 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbour.' "28 The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. 29 Then Moses said, "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day."   
  
There may be no question that the people were sinful, or that the Levites were ordered by Moses to slay their brothers, or that they actually did the slaying. The problem here is did GOD...literally... order them to do this? Would the God who has revealed himself to us, order this action?   
  
**Answer:**

It wasn't just a matter of the people being sinful. Remember that the people were under the covenant at that point. When we think of Israel and the Israelites, we always have to be conscious of the covenant. The covenant was what set the Jews apart from the rest of the world. Covenants form family bonds and only the Israelites were chosen to be in a family relationship with God. God even calls Israel "My beloved son."   
  
You will probably remember from your study that the Israelites ratified the covenant with God prior to the slaughter of the 3000 in Exodus 32. The covenant was ratified back in Exodus 24.

***When Moses came to the people and related all the words and ordinances of the LORD, they all answered with one voice, “We will do everything that the LORD has told us." Moses then wrote down all the words of the LORD and, rising early in the morning, he built at the foot of the mountain an altar and twelve sacred stones\* for the twelve tribes of Israel. Then, having sent young men of the Israelites to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice young bulls as communion offerings to the LORD, Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the other half he splashed on the altar. Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered, “All that the LORD has said, we will hear and do.” Then he took the blood and splashed it on the people, saying, “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words.”****(Exodus 24:3-8)*

At the time the covenant was ratified, every male head of household was his own priest. Every male head of household had to sacrifice a lamb at the Passover. Only priest's were allowed to offer sacrifice and prior to the transgression of the covenant and slaughter of the 3000 in Exodus 32, every male head of household was priest of his own house.  
  
But the people, and most importantly the male heads of each household, all worshipped a false God, the molten image of a calf. This was not just sin, but violation of the covenant with God which they had ratified and entered into, and the consequences for violating the covenant were clear...

***If you obey the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grow numerous, and the LORD, your God, will bless you in the land you are entering to occupy. If, however, you turn away your hearts and will not listen, but are led astray and adore and serve other gods, I tell you now that you will certainly perish; you will not have a long life on the land which you are crossing the Jordan to enter and occupy.****(Deuteronomy 30:16-18)*

It's not a matter of God being able to do whatever he wants or a matter of what the people deserved. It is a matter of the covenant, and when the people, especially the priests of each household, when they worshipped another God, the covenant stated that they must die.   
  
What God did was to take way the common priesthood from the people and give it to the Levites alone. Only the Levites did not worship the molten calf so only the Levites retained the priesthood.

***The Levites did as Moses had commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people fell. Then Moses said, “Today you are installed as priests for the LORD, for you went against your own sons and brothers, to bring a blessing upon yourselves this day.”****(Exodus 32:28-29)*

All other men lost the priesthood. This to me was extremely sad because prior to this event, each household could appeal to God and atone for their own sins. Now they had to go to a Levite to atone for their sins.   
  
To understand the big picture - how all of this points to Christ, how it points to the Church, and how it effects us, we can jump ahead and see what happened at Pentecost.

***Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, “What are we to do, my brothers?” Peter [said] to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit. ... Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.****(Acts 2:37-38,41)*

Notice that three thousand ***died*** at Mt. Sinai and that three thousand were ***added*** at Pentecost. Pentecost is the birth of the Church, and the fact that Luke tells us that three thousand were added that day is an indication that what happened as Mt. Sinai was reversed - the Church was born and the three thousand dead at Sinai was reversed when 3000 were added at Pentecost.   
  
The slaughter of the 3000 happened fifty days after leaving Egypt. Pentecost and the adding of the 3000 happened fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ. It's a reversal, and a restoration. The Bible is a story, and Exodus can't be viewed in the absence of the rest of the Bible. It all goes together and tells a story. In this case, it is the story of Man's restoration, a reversal of what happened at Mt. Sinai and of our restoration to the state of Israel right after they ratified the covenant.  
  
And do you know what happened in Exodus 24 when Israel ratified the covenant?

***They saw God, and they ate and drank.****(Exodus 24:11)*

Most people miss that little line. It might just be my favourite line in the whole Bible. It's a reversal, a return to the state where we see God, and we eat and drink. 